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Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to development

Written statement* submitted by the Child Foundation, a non-governmental organization in general consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[15 February 2015]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

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Children in Armed Conflicts

Today, grave violations are committed against children and youth in the war-affected countries of the world. Young girls and boys are killed, maimed, orphaned, abducted, deprived of education and health care, sexually violated and left with deep emotional and physical scars. These children and youth are uniquely and especially vulnerable to recruitment and hundreds of thousands are associated with State and non-State armed groups.

Children's participation in armed conflicts has serious implications for the physical and emotional well-being of them and their societies. The increase of civilian casualties, including children and youth, in contemporary armed conflicts is a reflection of the changing nature of conflict, in which we see the increased use of improvised explosive devices and new technologies, the conduct of hostilities increasingly in urban or densely populated civilian areas, and a blurring of the distinction between civilians and combatants. In some situations, children and youth are also used as suicide bombers and schools are systematically attacked jeopardizing the life of children and preventing them from going to school.

Children and youth also suffer from other consequences of conflict such as poverty, unemployment, poor governance and the disintegration of families and communities. Rehabilitation and reintegration is particularly critical for children and youth formerly associated with armed groups in order to break cycles of violence and to find a new existence after a life of conflict and distress. Disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programs play a critical and vital role in this context.

During armed conflict, young girls are subject to specifically widespread and, at times, systematic forms of human rights violations that have mental, emotional, spiritual, physical and material repercussions. These violations include illegal detention with or without family members, abduction and forced removal from families and homes, disappearances, torture and other inhuman treatment, amputation and mutilation, forced recruitment into fighting forces and groups, slavery, sexual exploitation, increased exposure to HIV/AIDS, and a wide range of physical and sexual violations, including rape, enforced pregnancy, forced prostitution, forced marriage and forced child-bearing. There is urgent need for better documentation, monitoring and reporting on the extreme suffering that armed conflict inflicts on girls, as well as on the many roles girls play during conflict and its aftermath. Such information and response mechanisms are needed for the purpose of strengthening and developing policy and programs to prevent and or address these grave rights violations.

Our region, the Middle East, has over many years been wracked by political violence and armed conflicts in which governments and armed groups alike have shown a pernicious disregard for the lives of civilians. Many governments and non-state actors in this region violate the core principle of international humanitarian law-civilian immunity-which requires a warring party to distinguish between the civilian population and military targets, and to direct attacks only against military targets. And, unfortunately, children are the main victims of such violence.

Some non-state armed groups in Syria have used children as young as 15 to fight in battles and in support roles. Extremist Islamist groups including the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS), Free Syrian Army, the Islamic Front coalition, and Jabhat al-Nusra, an Al-Qaeda affiliate, have specifically recruited children --in some cases, through free schooling campaigns that include weapons training, and have given them dangerous tasks, including suicide bombing missions [1]

Numerous factors influence the recruitment of young children into conflicts. Children are most vulnerable in areas where conflicts have raged over a long period of time. If children are born into and raised in a conflict zone, they are more likely to be de-sensitized to violence. They are also less likely to have been exposed to opportunities, such as education or jobs.

Besides forced recruitment, many children volunteer to fight as they have few other options for a livelihood outside of an armed organization. The military or militia is seen as a 'meal ticket' and a place for safety and security. Children are

[1]. http://www.hrw.org/reports/2014/06/22/maybe-we-live-and-maybe-we-die

also easier to convince and control, and often require little or no payment, making them targets for terror groups and militias.

In this environment, protecting the security and the basic rights of children in armed conflicts requires political and economic action, as well as humanitarian assistance. We urge the international community to use all the possible tools to stifle the resources and arms available to all armed groups, state and non-state, that violates the security and rights of children. Also, we urge all the Member States to adopt legislative measures to discourage corporate actors within their jurisdiction from engaging in commercial activities that support parties that engage in violations of the rights of children.

We believe that specific provisions for child protection, including the demobilization and reintegration of child soldiers, should be spelled out as a core element of all peacekeeping mandates and explicit provisions in all UN-supported peace agreements. Peacekeeping forces should receive training in child protection, and child protection advisors should be provided with a strong, clear mandate. As much as possible, crimes against children, including recruitment of child soldiers, should be excluded from amnesty agreements and youth themselves should be involved in efforts to achieve peace and reconciliation.

More specifically, we urge all the members of the international community to provide education as soon as possible and make it the fourth pillar of humanitarian assistance; work to prevent recruitment by providing alternatives, especially for adolescents and other particularly susceptible groups; increase targeted support to adolescents, whose needs are distinct and too often overlooked among children; recognize the special rights of young girls; include humanitarian exemptions for children in all sanctions and frequently monitor their impact; train all personnel deployed in times of crisis to respect and promote the rights of children; and cooperate with the international, regional and sub-regional organizations to protect children.

And finally, one option remains most urgently in front of society: Children already recruited into violent conflicts can be rescued and re-integrated into society. The international community does not need to wait for conflicts to end for children to be removed from armed organizations.